



US Vice President Dick Cheney (C) and Afghan President Hamid Karzai inspect an honour guard in the presidential palace in Kabul yesterday, hours after a suicide blast at the US base where he had spent the night killed 14 people.

Congress suffers defeat in 2 state election

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress was yesterday voted out of power in two key northern states of Punjab and Uttarakhand.

Congress conceded defeat to an alliance between Shiromani Akali Dal and BJP in Punjab and to BJP in Uttarakhand while the northeastern state of Manipur appeared headed for a fractured mandate.

The elections to the three states, where Congress had been in power for the last five years, were held earlier this month.

The Akali Dal-BJP combine bagged 66 seats of the results declared so far for the 117-member Punjab assembly while Congress had secured 42 seats.

The Akali Dal chief Prakash Singh Badal is set to become Punjab Chief Minister for the fourth time.

Badal, against whom the previ-

ous Congress government in the state led by Amarinder Singh had filed a number of graft cases, said after the poll victory that the new dispensation would not follow the politics of vendetta.

In Uttarakhand, where the legislature strength is 70, BJP was poised to form government on its own having bagged 27 out of the 58 seats whose results were announced so far.

Congress has so far got six seats and was ahead in counting of votes only in nine seats.

In both the states, Congress has conceded defeat admitting that sharp price rise may have been one of the major reasons for the electoral drubbing. The inflation in India has already touched more than two-year high.

In Uttarakhand, the race for chief ministership appears to have narrowed down between senior BJP leaders Bhagat Singh Koshyari and BC Khanduri who did not contest

the assembly election. Koshyari is a former chief minister of the state while Khanduri, a retired military officer, is a former federal minister.

Manipur witnessed an intense

battle where Congress was ahead

winning six seats out of the 17 seats

declared so far. On the other side,

the NCP has won four, RJD two,

CPI two, Manipur Peoples' Party

one and Independents two.

Reacting to the poll results,

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

rejected suggestions that this was a

referendum on his government's

performance for the last two and

half years.

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'Loud boom' sent me to bunker, says Cheney

AFP, Kabul

US Vice President Dick Cheney said the suicide bombing at the gate of a US air base he was visiting in Afghanistan on Tuesday made a "loud boom" and drove him briefly into a bomb shelter.

But Cheney said it was "never an option" to scrap plans to go on to the Afghan capital Kabul, where he later held talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Speaking to a small group of reporters inside his high-tech customised trailer in the belly of the cavernous military plane taking him to his next stop Oman, Cheney said he had heard a "loud boom" when the attack occurred.

"It was about 10 o'clock this morning. I heard a loud boom. And shortly after that the Secret Service came in and told me there had been an attack on the main gate -- apparently a suicide bomber," Cheney said.

"They moved me for a relatively

brief period of time to one of the bomb shelters near the quarters I was staying in," said Cheney, who appeared relaxed in his suit and cowboy boots as he retold the story.

Once the situation "settled down", he said, he returned to his room until it was time to leave.

While the base briefly went to "red alert" after the attack, which killed at least 14 people, the bloodshed did not derail his plans to meet Karzai.

Asked whether he considered cancelling the meeting, the centrepiece of his surprise visit to Afghanistan, Cheney said: "No. Never an option."

The vice president said he was unaware of reports that the Taliban had claimed responsibility for the attack but said such attacks should "never affect our behaviour at all".

"I think they clearly try to find ways to question the authority of the central government and striking at Bagram (Air Base) with a suicide bomber ... is one way to do that," he said.

The United States, which says "all options" are on the table while insisting it wants a peaceful solution, has ratcheted up pressure by sending an extra aircraft carrier to the Gulf.

Russia has voiced concern about growing talk of military strikes and China again called on Tuesday for a diplomatic solution. Both countries, which have veto powers in the Security Council, have been

reluctant to penalize Iran in the past.

"Suspending uranium enrichment is an illegal and illegitimate demand ... and it will never happen," Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said quoted by the official IRNA news agency as saying. Another agency said he backed atomic talks but without preconditions.

Officials from the five permanent

UN Security Council members -- the

United States, France, Russia, China and Britain -- plus Germany, who met in London on Monday, also

said they were committed to a

negotiated resolution to the stand-

off.

The United Nations imposed limited sanctions on Iran's nuclear programme in December and Tehran faces possible further steps for ignoring a February 21 deadline to halt enrichment, which the West says Iran is using so it can make atomic bombs.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said military strikes on Iranian atomic sites were "abso-

lutely not an issue."

"There is a big chance that we will all be able to agree quickly, including the Russians and the Chinese, the Americans, the British and the French, on a second resolution with economic sanctions," he said in televised remarks after Monday's meeting.

Iran, the world's fourth biggest oil

producer, insists its plans are civilian and that it only wants to enrich uranium to make fuel for nuclear power plants. Mottaki said Iran was ready to give guarantees that Iran had no covert military aims.

Iran's open refusal to suspend nuclear fuel work is echoed by some Iranian officials in private, suggesting the public pronouncements are more than just rhetoric.

The kind of compromise mooted by chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larjani, is for Tehran to cap uranium enrichment at four percent, far below the level needed for bombs. Western diplomats reject this, saying Iran would still obtain atomic skills.

Vice President Dick Cheney said on Saturday in Australia it would be a "serious mistake" to let Iran become an atomic power.

The United States, which has called for "regime change" in Iran in the past, says it is ready to talk to Iran but only once Tehran suspends enrichment.

UN envoy for Nepal predicts tough polls

AP, United Nations

The chief UN envoy to Nepal said Monday there are a number of technical and political obstacles facing the country ahead of anticipated elections in mid-June.

"There's the important question of how adequate security can be guaranteed for the election," Ian Martin said. "Not just immediately ahead of the ballot, but also in the period when all political parties need to be able to campaign freely."

The inclusion of minority groups and women is also among "considerable challenges" to holding the election on schedule, Martin said.

The UN's newest political mission, established by the Security Council last month, allowed for the deployment of former military officers to monitor the country's civil

situation after a cease-fire agreement was signed in November.

The mission is also authorised to

provide "technical support for the

planning, preparation and conduct" of the elections.

Under the cease-fire agreement, Maoist rebels agreed to join an interim parliament and hand over weapons to UN arms monitors, ending a bloody 10-year communist insurgency that left more than 13,000 people dead.

The International Crisis Group, a non-governmental organisation that works toward conflict resolution, issued a report Monday calling for "a constitution that permanently ends the conflict and addresses the widespread grievances."

"It must conclusively end the conflict and also shape more representative and responsive state structures," said Rhoderick Chalmers, deputy director of the group's South Asia project. "Balancing these concerns is far from straightforward, but broader public participation can only help."

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provide "technical support for the

Democracy 100 years away, says China PM

AP, Beijing

Communist leaders have no plans to allow democracy in the near future because they must focus on economic development before political reform, China's No 3 leader said in comments published Tuesday.

Democracy will emerge once a "mature socialist system" develops but that might not happen for up to 100 years, Premier Wen Jiabao wrote in an article in the People's Daily, the main Communist Party newspaper.

For now, China must focus on "sustained rapid growth of productive forces ... to finally secure fairness and social justice that lies within the essence of socialism," Wen wrote.

The premier, China's No 3 leader, said the country is "still far from advancing out of the primary stage of socialism. We must adhere to the party's basic guidelines of the primary stage of socialism for 100 years."

Britain doesn't see talks with Taliban for now

REUTERS, Islamabad

Britain does not foresee any chance of dialogue with Taliban leaders running an insurgency in Afghanistan, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said in Pakistan yesterday.

Beckett said she had no inclination to talk to Taliban commanders whose expressed goals were to kill British troops stationed in Afghanistan.

But, she added that talks with former Taliban or sympathisers who were no longer active might be a possibility in the future.

"That could be a different matter, but I certainly don't envisage some form or process of dialogue at present," Beckett said, answering questions after delivering a speech to an audience largely made up of diplomats in the Pakistani capital.

Iraq bombings kill 22

AFP, Baghdad

At least 22 people were killed in Iraq on Tuesday in a spate of mortar and bomb attacks, including one on a popular central Baghdad eatery at lunchtime, security officials said.

In the main northern city of Mosul, a suicide bomber rammed a truck through the fence of Sheikh

Fatihi police station and detonated explosives, killing at least six policemen, police said.

A police official said around 25 people were wounded, including civilians, and the building was almost destroyed.

Two people died in the blast at the budget restaurant, frequented by labourers, in Tayaran square in the centre of Baghdad, an official said.

Documentary claims discovery of tomb of Jesus, wife and son

AFP, New York

A documentary by "Titanic" director James Cameron claims to have found the burial site of the biblical Jesus and his alleged wife and son in an ancient family cemetery in Jerusalem.

Cameron and his co-filmmaker, Israeli-born Simcha Jacobovici said Monday their research suggested Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had a son, Judah, who were buried with him.

The claim contradicts the Bible's account that the Christian Son of God was single, died when crucified and resurrected three days later and ascended to heaven, central tenets of Christian belief.

The explosive claims in the documentary "The Lost Tomb of Christ" could reignite questions about whether Jesus had an earthly family life -- an idea popularised in the hit book and movie "The Da Vinci Code."

Cameron and Jacobovici, an award-winning documentary director, based their film on a tomb unearthed in Talpiot, Jerusalem, in 1980 by a construction crew devel-

oping an apartment complex.

They cite evidence of names etched on ossuaries, or limestone bone boxes, dug up at the site, as well as DNA evidence they hold and other technical analysis.

US Catholic and Protestant leaders however ridiculed the claims, saying that there is no proof linking the find to the biblical Jesus.

"I am not an archaeologist or a Bible scholar," Cameron told reporters Monday.

But, he said "as a documentary filmmaker I should not be afraid of pursuing the truth," he said.

"I know they will say that we try to undermine Christianity. That is far from the case. This investigation celebrates the real existence of these people."

The documentary is to air Sunday on US cable television.

Five of the 10 boxes discovered in the Talpiot tomb were inscribed with names believed referring to key figures in the New Testament: Jesus, Mary, Matthew, Joseph and Mary Magdalene. A sixth inscription, written Aramaic, translates to "Judah son of Jesus."



US filmmaker James Cameron talks about the ossuaries (bone boxes) believed to be those of Jesus of Nazareth (R) and Mary Magdalene (L) at a press conference on Monday in New York.